Hints for healthy grocery shopping

If you're making an effort to eat better, you've probably found yourself standing in a supermarket aisle at some point, trying to figure out what to buy. Given the overwhelming choices available, shopping for healthy groceries can seem like a confusing, time-consuming chore.

Well relax, we've got some information to make healthy shopping easier for you. Read on, then log in to Healthy Lifestyle Rewards at **blueshieldca.com/hlr**, click on *Health Programs*, and select *Nutrition* to find tools and information to help you eat well. Plus you can find recipes and more by selecting *Health Tools*, and other useful tools are also found on *Quizzes and Calculators*.

Here are some tips for healthier shopping:

Shopping strategies

Before you head to the store, take a few minutes to plan your meals for the week (or however long until you shop again), and make a list of what you'll need. It's also a good idea to keep an ongoing shopping list somewhere in your kitchen, so you can add items as you run out.

To plan healthy meals, focus on the usual suspects: fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, nuts, beans, calcium-rich dairy products, and some healthy protein such as poultry, fish, eggs, or tofu. (For more detailed nutritional guidance, see the online resources listed at the end.)

At the store, concentrate your shopping in the outer aisles, where you'll typically find fresh foods like fruits and vegetables, dairy, meat, and fish. Avoid the center aisles, which are home to highly processed snacks and other junk foods. It's also important to read the ingredient labels on foods. They'll help you quickly separate the genuinely healthy items from the pretenders.

Another thing: Never shop when you're hungry. You're much more likely to succumb to temptation and find yourself in the checkout line with a family-size bag of chips and a half-dozen cupcakes.

What to buy

Whole grains

When choosing bread, pasta, rice, or cereal, aim for the least processed foods that are made from whole grains. For example, choose brown rice instead of white, whole wheat bread and pastas, grain mixes, quinoa, bulgur, and barley. The whole grain should be the first ingredient listed on the label (that means it's

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the largest ingredient by weight). Cereals should have at least four grams of fiber per serving, and the less sugar, the better.

Fruits and vegetables

The American Heart Association (AHA) recommends eating eight or more fruit and vegetable servings every day, totaling about four and a half cups. Fresh is best, but don't forget about frozen fruits and vegetables – they're a convenient way to keep nutritious ingredients handy. Just choose those without added sauces and flavorings. Precut fresh veggies are another convenient time-saver. Although they may cost more, there's no waste, and you're more likely to use them because they're ready to eat.

Lean meat, fish, eggs, and poultry

The AHA recommends two servings of fish a week. Oiler fish (salmon, trout, and herring) are particularly good because they contain omega-3 fatty acids, which may help lower your risk of heart disease. Look for lean cuts of meat (like round, top sirloin, and tenderloin), and choose skinless poultry or remove the skin after you cook it.

Dairy

Milk, yogurt, cheese and other dairy products are an excellent source of calcium and vitamin D. Look for fat-free, 1% fat, and low-fat milk varieties. If you just can't live without some higher-fat cheeses, keep your portions small (a serving is roughly one and a half ounces – about the size of four stacked dice.)

Canned and dried foods

Items like canned tuna and beans are great to have on hand -- just beware of too much added salt or sugar. Keep a supply on your shelves so you can make quick soups or add to salads, pasta, etc.

What to avoid

Highly processed foods

A good rule of thumb is to avoid foods that have more than five ingredients or contain artificial ingredients or unidentifiable chemicals.

Salt (sodium)

Too much raises your blood pressure and increases your risk of stroke and heart disease, so look for it on the label. In 2009 the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended that people with high blood pressure, people over 40, and all African-American adults eat no more than 1500 milligrams of sodium daily (about two-thirds of a teaspoon.) For others, the recommendation is 2300 milligrams. Most of the sodium in our diets comes from processed foods like canned goods, soups, and prepared mixes, rather than from a salt shaker.

Sugar

It's full of calories but no nutrients, so limit your intake. Choose foods with less than five grams of sugar a serving, and beware "hidden" sugars that are listed in the ingredients under names like high-fructose corn syrup, dextrose, invert sugar, or turbinado.

Saturated fats and trans fats

Often labeled "hydrogenated" or "partially hydrogenated" vegetable oils, these fats are bad for your cholesterol levels and increase your risk of heart disease and stroke. They're commonly found in items like pastries, cookies, crackers, stick margarines, and shortening.

Cholesterol
It's found in animal products such as meat, poultry, fish, eggs, butter, cheese, and whole and 2% milk. Aim to eat less than 300 milligrams each day.

Healthy Lifestyle Rewards

You can find more useful information at Healthy Lifestyle Rewards, an online program that helps you lead a healthy lifestyle. Just log in once a week, use the tools and programs, and begin living a healthy lifestyle. To start, register at **blueshieldca.com/hlr**.

More online resources

Personalized eating plans and interactive tools based on federal dietary guidelines from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA):
www.mypyramid.gov

Detailed information on food and nutrition, from the USDA:
www.nutrition.gov
Detailed nutrition guidance from the Harvard School of Public Health:
www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource

Tips on how to add more fruits and vegetables to your daily diet, plus tools to help you calculate how many servings you need:
www.fruitsandveggiesmatter.gov